

AT THE
PISTOL'S
POINT

E.W. HORNUNG

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At the Pistol's Point

E W Hornung

THE church bells were ringing for evensong, croaking across the snow with short, harsh strokes, as though the frost had eaten into the metal and made it hoarse. Outside, the scene had all the cheery sparkle, all the peaceful glamour, of an old-fashioned Christmas card. There was the snow-covered village, there the church-spire coated all down one side, the chancel windows standing out like oil-paintings, the silver sickle of a moon, the ideal thatched cottage with the warm, red light breaking from the open door, and the peace of Heaven seemingly pervading and enveloping all. Yet on earth we know that this peace is not; and the door of the ideal cottage had been opened and was shut by a crushed woman, whose husband had but now refused her pennies for the plate, with a curse which followed her into the snow. And the odour prevailing beneath the thatched roof was one of hot brandy-and-water, mingled with the fumes of some rank tobacco.

Old Fitch was over sixty years of age, and the woman on her way to church was his third wife; she had borne him no child, nor had Fitch son or daughter living who would set foot inside his house. He was a singular old man, selfish and sly and dissolute, yet not greatly disliked beyond his own door, and withal a miracle of health and energy for his years. He drank to his heart's content, but he was never drunk, nor was Sunday's bottle ever known to lose him the soft side of Monday's bargain. By trade he was game-dealer, corn-factor, money-lender, and mortgagee of half the village; in appearance, a man of medium height, with bow-legs and immense round shoulders, a hard mouth, shrewd eyes, and wiry hair as white as the snow outside.

The bells ceased, and for a moment there was no sound in the

cottage but the song of the kettle on the hob. Then Fitch reached for the brandy-bottle, and brewed himself another steaming bumper. As he watched the sugar dissolve, a few notes from the organ reached his ears, and the old man smiled cynically as he sipped and smacked his lips. At his elbow his tobacco-pipe and the weekly newspaper were ranged with the brandy-bottle, and he was soon in enjoyment of all three. Over the paper Fitch had already fallen asleep after a particularly hearty mid-day meal, but he had not so much as glanced at the most entertaining pages, and he found them now more entertaining than usual. There was a scandal in high life running to several columns, and sub-divided into paragraphs labelled with the most pregnant headlines; the old man's mouth watered as he determined to leave this item to the last. It was not the only one of interest; there were several suicides, an admirable execution, a burglary, and--what? Fitch frowned as his quick eye came tumbling down a paragraph; then all at once he gasped out an oath and sat very still. The pipe in his mouth went out, the brandy-and-water was cooling in his glass; you might have heard them singing the psalms in the church hard by; but the old man heard nothing, saw nothing, thought of nothing but the brief paragraph before his eyes.

'ESCAPE FROM PORTLAND.

'ONE CONVICT KILLED, ANOTHER WOUNDED,

BUT A THIRD GETS CLEAN AWAY.

'The greatest excitement was caused at Weymouth yesterday morning on the report being circulated that several convicts had effected their escape from the grounds of the Portland convict establishment. There appears to have been a regularly concerted plan on the part of the prisoners working in one of the outdoor gangs to attempt to regain their liberty, as yesterday morning three convicts bolted simultaneously from their party. They were instantly challenged

to stop, but as the order was not complied with, the warders fired several shots. One of the runaways fell dead, and another was so badly wounded that he was immediately recaptured, and is now lying in a precarious condition. The third man, named Henry Cattermole, continued his course despite a succession of shots, and was soon beyond range of the rifles. He was pursued for some distance, but was ultimately lost to view in the thick fog which prevailed. A hue and cry was raised, and search parties continued to scour the neighbourhood long after dark, but up to a late hour his recapture had not been effected. Cattermole will be remembered as the man who was sentenced to death some years ago for the murder of Lord Wolborough's game-keeper, near Bury St. Edmund's, but who afterwards received the benefit of the doubt involved in the production of a wad which did not fit the convict's gun. In spite of the successful efforts then made on his behalf, however, the authorities at Portland describe Cattermole as a most daring criminal, and one who is only too likely to prove a danger to the community as long as he remains at large.

Fitch stared stupidly at the words for several minutes after he had read them through; it was the last sentence which at length fell into focus with his seeing eye. Henry Cattermole at large! How long had he been at large? It was a Sunday paper, but the Saturday edition, and this was among the latest news. But it said "yesterday morning," and that meant Friday morning last. So Henry Cattermole had been at large since then, and this was the Sunday evening, and that made nearly three days altogether. Another question now forced itself upon the old man's mind: how far was it from Portland prison to this room?

Like most rustics of his generation, old Fitch had no spare knowledge of geography: he knew his own country-side and the road to London, but that was all. Portland he knew to be on the other side of London; it might be ten miles, might be two hundred; but this he felt in his shuddering heart and shaking bones, that near or far, deep

snow or no snow, Henry Cattermole was either recaptured or else on his way to that cottage at that moment.

The feeling sucked the blood from the old man's vessels, even as his lips drained the tumbler he had filled with so light a heart. Then for a little he had spurious courage. He leant back in his chair and laughed aloud, but it sounded strangely in the empty cottage; he looked up at the bell-mouthed gun above the chimney-piece, and that gave him greater confidence, for he kept it loaded. He got up and began to whistle, but stopped in the middle of a bar.

"Curse him!" he said aloud, "they should ha' hanged him, and then I never should ha' been held like this. That'll be a good job if they take an' hang him now, for I fare to feel afraid, I do, as long as Harry Cattermole's alive."

Old Fitch opened his door a moment, saw the thin moon shining on the snow, but no living soul abroad, and for once he was in want of a companion; however, the voices of the choir sounded nearer than ever in the frosty air, and heartened him a little as he shut the door again, turned the heavy key, and shot both bolts well home. He was still stooping over the bottom one, when his eyes fell upon a ragged trouser-leg and a stout stocking planted close behind him. It was instantly joined by another ragged leg and another stout stocking. Neither made a sound, for there were no shoes to the cat-like feet; and the stockings were remarkable for a most conspicuous stripe.

Then old Fitch knew that his enemy had found him out, and he could not stir. He was waiting for a knife to plunge into the centre of his broad, round back; and when a hand slapped him there instead, he thought for a moment he was stabbed indeed. When he knew that he was not, he turned round, still stooping, in a pitiable attitude, and a new shock greeted him. Could this be Henry Cattermole?

The poacher had been stout and thick-set; the convict was gaunt and lean. The one had been florid and youthful; the other was yellow as parchment, and the stubble on the cropped head and on the fleshless jaw was of a leaden grey.

"That--that ain't Harry Cattermole?" the old man whimpered.

"No, that ain't; but 'twas once, and means to be again! Lead the way in beside the fire. I wish you'd sometimes use that front parlour of yours! I've had it to myself this half-hour, and that's cold."

Old Fitch led the way without a word, walked innocently up to the fire, and suddenly sprang for his gun. He never reached it. The barrel of a revolver, screwed round in his ear, drove him reeling across the floor.

"Silly old fool! " hissed Cattermole. "Did you think I'd come to you unarmed? Sit down on that chair before I blow your brains out."

Fitch obeyed.

"I--I can't make out," he stuttered, "why you fare to come to me at all!"

"O' course you can't," said Cattermole, ironically.

"If I'd been you, I'd ha' run anywhere but. where I was known so well."

"You would, would you? Then you knew I'd got out, eh, old man?"

"Just been a-reading about it in this here paper."

"I see--I see. I caught a bit o' what you was a-saying to yourself, just as I was thinking it was a safe thing to come out o' that cold parlour o' yours. So that was me you was locking out, was it? Yet you pretend you don't know why I come! You know well enough. You know--you know!"

The convict had seated himself on the kitchen table, and was glaring down on the trembling old man in the chair. He wore a long overcoat, and under it some pitiful rags. The cropped head and the legs swinging in the striped stockings were the only incriminating features, and old Fitch was glancing from the one to the other, wondering why neither had saved him from this horrible interview. Cattermole read his thoughts, and his eyes gleamed.

"So you think I've come all the way in these here, do you?" he cried, tapping one shin. "I tell you I've walked and walked till my bare legs were frozen, and then sat behind a hedge and slipped these on and rubbed them to life again! Where do you think I got these rotten old duds? Off of a scare-crow in a field, I did! I wasn't going to break into no houses and leave my tracks all along the line. But yesterday I got a long lift in a goods train, or I shouldn't be here now; and last night I did crack a crib for this here overcoat and a bit o' supper, and another for the shooter. That didn't so much matter then. I was within twenty mile of you! Of you, you old devil--do you hear?"

Fitch nodded with an ashen face.

"And now do you know why I've come?"

Fitch moistened his blue lips. "To--to murder me!" he whispered, like a dying man.

"That rests with you," said the convict, fondling his weapon.

"What do you want me to do?"

"Confess!"

"Confess what?" whispered Fitch.

"That you swore me away at the trial."

The old man had been holding his breath; he now expelled it with a deep sigh, and taking out a huge red handkerchief, wiped the moisture from his face. Meanwhile, the convict had descried writing-materials on a chiffonnier, and placed them on the table beside the brandy-bottle and the tobacco-jar.

"Turn your chair round for writing." Fitch did so. "Now take up your pen and write what I tell you. Don't cock your head and look at me! I hear the psalm-singing as well as you do; they've only just got started, and nobody'll come near us for another hour. Pity you didn't go too, isn't it? Now write what I tell you, word for word, or, so help me, you're a stiff 'un!"

Fitch dipped his pen in the ink. After all, what he was about to write would be written under dire intimidation, and nobody would attach any importance to statements so obtained. He squared his elbows to the task.

"I, Samuel Fitch," began Cattermole, "'do hereby swear and declare before God Almighty'--before God Almighty, have you got that down? --'that I, Samuel Fitch, did bear false witness against my neighbour, Henry Cattermole, at his trial at Bury Assizes, November 29th, 1887. It is true that I saw both Henry Cattermole and James Savage, his lordship's gamekeeper, in the wood at Wolborough on the night of September 9th in the same year. It is true that I was there by appointment with Savage, as his wife stated in her evidence. It is not true that I heard a shot and heard Savage sing out, 'Harry Cattermole!' as I came up and before ever I had a word with him. That statement was a deliberate fabrication on my part. The real truth is--but hold on! I'm likely going too fast for you--I've had it in my head that long! How much have you got down, eh?"

"Fabrication on my part," repeated old Fitch, in a trembling voice, as he waited for more.

"Good! Now pull yourself together," said Cattermole, suddenly cocking his revolver. "The real truth is that I, Samuel Fitch, shot James Savage with my own hand!"

Fitch threw down his pen.

"That's a lie," he gasped. "I never did! I won't write it."

The cocked revolver covered him.

"Prefer to die in your chair, eh? "

"Yes."

"I'll give you one minute by your own watch."

Still covering his man, the convict held out his other hand for the watch, and had momentary contact with a cold, damp one as it dropped into his palm. Cattermole placed the watch upon the table where both could see the dial.

"Your minute begins now," said he; and all at once the watch was ticking like an eight-day clock.

Fitch rolled his head from side to side. "Fifteen seconds," said Cattermole. The old man's brow was white and spangled like the snow outside. "Half-time," said Cattermole. Five, ten, fifteen, twenty seconds passed; then Fitch caught up the pen. "Go on!" he groaned. "I'll write any lie you like; that'll do you no good; no one will believe a word of it." Yet the perspiration was streaming down his face; it splashed upon the paper as he proceeded to write, in trembling characters, at Cattermole's dictation.

"The real truth is that I, Samuel Fitch, shot James Savage with my own hand. The circumstances that led to my shooting him I will confess and explain hereafter. When he had fallen I heard a shout and someone running up. I got behind a tree, but I saw Harry Cattermole, the poacher, trip clean over the body. His gun went off in the air, and when he tried to get up again, I saw he couldn't because he'd twisted his ankle. He never saw me; I slipped away and gave my false evidence, and Harry Cattermole was caught escaping from the wood on his hands and knees, with blood upon his hands and clothes, and an empty gun. I gave evidence against him to stop him giving evidence against me. But this is the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help me God!"

Cattermole paused, Fitch finished writing; again the eyes of the two men met; and those of the elder gleamed with a cunning curiosity.

"How--how did you know?" he asked, lowering his voice and leaning forward as he spoke.

"Two and two," was the reply. "I put 'em together as soon as ever I saw you in the box."

"That'll never be believed--got like this."

Will it not? Wait a bit; you've not done yet. 'As a proof of what I say '--do you hear me?--'as a proof of what I say, the gun which the wad will fit, that saved Henry Cattermole's life, will be found --"

Cattermole waited until the old man had caught him up.

"Now," said he, "you finish the sentence for yourself!"

"What? " cried Fitch.

"Write where that gun's to be found--you know--I don't--and then sign your name!"

"But I don't know- "

"You do."

"I sold it! "

"You wouldn't dare. You've got that somewhere, I see it in your face. Write down where, and then show me the place; and if you've told a lie--"

The revolver was within a foot of the old man's head, which had fallen forward between his hands. The pen lay blotting the wet paper. Cattermole took the brandy-bottle, poured out a stiff dram, and pushed it under the other's nose.

"Drink! " he cried. "Then write the truth, and sign your name. Maybe they won't hang an old man like you; but, by God, I sha'n't think twice about shooting you if you don't write the truth!"

Fitch gulped down the brandy, took up the pen once more, and was near the end of his own death-warrant, when the convict sprang lightly from the table and stood listening in the centre of the room. Fitch saw him, and listened too. In the church they were singing another hymn; the old man saw by his watch, still lying on the table, that it must be the last hymn, and in a few minutes his wife would be back. But that was not all. There was another sound--a nearer sound--the sound of voices outside the door. The handle was turned--the door pushed--but Fitch himself had locked and bolted it. More whispers; then a loud rat-tat.

"Who is it?" cried Fitch, trembling with excitement, as he started to his feet.

"The police! Let us in, or we break in your door! "

There was no answer. Cattermole was watching the door; suddenly he turned, and there was Fitch in the act of dropping his written confession into the fire. The convict seized it before it caught, and with the other hand hurled the old man back into his chair.

"Finish it," he said below his breath, "or you're a dead man! One or other of us is going to swing! Now, then, under the floor of what room did you hide the gun? Let them hammer, the door is strong. What room was it? Ah, your bedroom! Now sign your name."

A deafening crash; the lock had given; only the bolt held firm.

"Sign!" shrieked Cattermole. A cold ring pressed the old man's temple. He signed his name, and fell forward on the table in a dead faint.

Cattermole blotted the confession, folded it up, strode over to the door, and smilingly flung it open to his pursuers.

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